

Karen Telleen-Lawton » Serendipity: Leaving Small Carbon Footprints

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We can have a big impact on the environment if we learn to consume and invest responsibly

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 08.15.2009

The other day, the feature story on [Investment News](#) — the leading news for financial planners — was about carbon footprints. Something’s changing when the headline story on a financial Web site is about the environment: It has become mainstream. What exactly is a carbon footprint, and why should we care, as consumers or investors?

One clear definition is provided on a [Web site that touts itself as “the home of the carbon footprint.”](#) The term is “a measure of the impact our activities have on the environment, and in particular climate change. It relates to the amount of greenhouse gases produced in our day-to-day lives through burning fossil fuels for electricity, heating and transportation.”

Not surprisingly, no matter how careful we are in our attempts in daily life, citizens in developed countries create a phenomenally larger footprint than the rest of the world. If I grow my own veggies, bike to work and wear clothes past when friends have moved on to the latest fashion — and then fly away to an eco-vacation — I’ve pretty much supersized my impact on the Earth.



Our primary effects include home energy (27 percent), private transportation (10 percent), public transportation (3 percent) and holiday flights (6 percent). The remaining impacts are termed secondary impacts — ones over which we have limited or no control. They include food (5 percent), clothing and other personal (4 percent), car manufacture and delivery (7 percent), house and contents (9 percent), recreation and leisure (14 percent), financial services (3 percent) and our share of public services (12 percent).

Why should we care? I would venture a guess that most people who take the time to think about life goals include “leaving the world a better place” in their top tier. But no matter our altruism in other ways, it’s difficult for someone in a developed country — and increasingly in a developing country — to accomplish this, given the effect of our carbon use on the Earth.

The carbon footprint Web site has good tips on how we can reduce or mitigate our footprints. One way is to give ourselves or a friend [the gift of carbon offsets](#). This feel-good gift involves using a simple calculator to estimate how much carbon is burned in supporting one’s lifestyle: auto, flight or home footprint.

My son did this for my birthday. He then made a donation in the amount of my carbon use to an organization that would plant sufficient trees to offset my print. If you’re concerned about the reliability of the Web sites, another option is to buy and then retire allowances in the [European cap-and-trade scheme](#).

The [Green Century Mutual Funds](#) are taking footprints to a new level. They hired an independent consultant to analyze the carbon footprints of each of the companies in which their Green Century Balanced Fund (GCBLX) invests. According to Investment News, carbon emissions per million dollars of revenue of the individual companies in GCBLX had a carbon footprint of 126, which is two-thirds less than that of the [Standard & Poor’s 500](#) stock index.

As an economist, I do have some reluctance for this type of social consciousness solution to a critical and monumental problem. That is, most of us will free-ride our carbon use until we are forced to pay. But maybe education and social consciousness are necessary first steps. It’s the way we’ve ameliorated other problems such as littering (remember the public advertisements to “not be a litterbug”?). We go as far as we can with carrots before resorting to sticks.

Little by little, we can learn to consume responsibly, invest responsibly and remember the joy of sauntering in the summer sun, leaving only noncarbonated physical footprints.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton’s column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*